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SUBJECT: MADAGASCAR PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES VENT TO DONORS

REF: ANTANANARIVO 1186

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: All but one of Madagascar's 14 presidential candidates, or their representatives, met foreign donors assisting Madagascar's electoral process on November 7. President Ravalomanana's representative, Minister of Education Haja Nirina Razafinjato, did not speak. All other candidates decried the current government along several common themes: the illegality of the election date; the irregularities in the election lists; and their lack of access to the media. A few forecast a debacle and blamed, in advance, the international community for allowing it. Several of the donors spoke to some of these specific allegations, but their reasonable replies appeared to fall on deaf ears. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) At the behest of several candidates, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) ResRep Bouri Sanhoubi invited all 14 of the official candidates (listed Reftel) for a give-and-take session with ambassadors from the donor countries and organizations assisting Madagascar in its elections. Nine candidates appeared in person and five sent representatives, including President Ravalomanana who sent Education Minister Razafinjato. Only former telecommunication minister, Ny Hasina Andriamanjato, was unrepresented. While the session was closed, there was massive press presence before and after; most newspapers gave the event front page coverage November 8.

¶3. (U) Every candidate complained that the December 3 date set for the elections was unconstitutional. None was willing to propose an alternate date, even when challenged by the German Ambassador to do so. None was able to explain how the earlier date disadvantaged them in any way, since the date had been announced with plenty of advance notice in May, and the date represented a reduction - not an extension - of the President's term. Only Herizo Razafimahaleo made a logical case, admitting that the date itself was not significant except as an indicator that the current government rules with impunity, showing itself willing to ignore the constitution when it chooses to. Both French Ambassador Le Roy and European Union Chief of Mission Boidin pointed out that the government had sought guidance on the date and received approval from the High Constitutional Court in advance of announcing it.

¶4. (U) Most of the candidates also complained that the electoral lists were flawed. Pety Rakotoniaina explicitly claimed the lists were being falsified by the government to the advantage of the ruling party. Other candidates were less accusatory, but still claimed the process of updating the lists was not being carried out transparently. The EU is funding most of the computerization of the

new list and is sensitive to this critique. However, when Boidin asserted that no list will be perfect, but that the computerized list will still be a marked improvement over what went before, Army General Ferdinand Razakarimanana replied acidly that an electronic list can still be a fraudulent list. Several of the donors pointed out that the updating of the lists was being carried out locally and that the political parties and candidates should be urging their partisans to ensure that this is done accurately.

15. (U) A majority of the candidates complained that they were not being given adequate access to the State media. They pointed out that only through the radio and TV can the voters come to know the candidates. Some complained that the announcement of their candidacies had been ignored in the media, others complained that they would not be allowed sufficient time to make their case to the public, and yet others complained that some candidates (read: the President) have access to private media that the others do not. The Swiss Charge acknowledged some of these concerns, but pointed out that the "equal access" to public media is only guaranteed for the campaign period that had not yet officially begun. He said the donors would be watching to see how the GOM decides to allocate time on public radio and TV. He mentioned that he had been posted previously in totalitarian states, and that having private media was not a curse but a blessing.

16. (U) A few candidates took the opportunity to be sharply critical of the donor community. A couple hinted darkly at improper involvement in Madagascar's internal affairs. More common was a sense of blaming the donor community, in advance, for a presumed failure of the election to be free and fair. One candidate even forecast that Madagascar would slip into violence and chaos and that the international community would be to blame if it did.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The candidates got their chance to vent, but few came across as being remotely statesmanlike and many were not even responsible. The French Ambassador pointed out that no election is perfect, but it appears clear that they will criticize any minor

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flaw bitterly, whether it has any bearing on the outcome or not. The UNDP ResRep's point, that the government's request for help from the international community was a positive sign of its intention to hold a clean election, went unacknowledged. The candidates' readiness to cry "foul" before a single vote has been cast probably reflects the political strength of President Ravalomanana and their unspoken recognition that he may be almost impossible to beat. On December 4 they will, no doubt, still be arguing that the election should not have been held on December 3. From the standpoint of Madagascar's democracy it is disappointing that complaints about the process seem to trump active participation and that no candidate appears to be building a party organization with a future-looking perspective. Instead of presenting any kind of a positive alternative, the common campaign tactic consists merely of sniping at the government and its shortcomings. Fortunately the veiled threats of violence seem to emanate mostly from candidates with little following. That said, isolated violent incidents are highly likely and a measured government response will be needed to prevent them from escalating. END COMMENT.

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